



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

# After the War

by Ginalie Swaim

The soldier returning from war “was like a man lost in a dream,” wrote midwestern author Hamlin Garland in a short story titled “The Return of a Private.” “His wide, hungry eyes devoured the scene. The rough lawn, the little unpainted house, the field of clear yellow wheat behind it, down across which streamed the sun.” Garland continued, “His farm was weedy and encumbered . . . his children needed clothing, the years were coming upon him, he was sick and emaciated.”

Garland was nearly five when his father returned from the war. “All was not the same as before,” Hamlin wrote decades later. “My father brought back from his two years’ campaigning . . . the temper and habit of a soldier.”

Readjusting to home was not simple for Civil War

veterans. A few lines from a popular poem spoke of their bewilderment:

*As soon as they mustered us out  
I lost the old vigor, and wandered about;  
Somehow I’m a failure and scarcely know why.  
Unable to labor, too weary to roam.*

“The chasm created by the Civil War was uncrossable. It was not just the distance from the battlefield,” writes historian Susan Matt. “It was the experience, the knowledge of death, suffering, misery, and reality, that might forever keep them from going back to what they had been and believed before the war.”

As much as the returning soldier was a symbol of victory for the North, and of valor for the South, he was

also a problem to society. "Prisons of the late 1860s swelled with demobilized veterans," writes Todd DePastino. "Memories of the terrors and thrill of combat, as well as the camaraderie of camp life, caused more than a few veterans to chafe against what one soldier called the 'monotonous quiet of home' and turn to a life of unfocused wandering." Some became itinerant laborers on the margins of society. Although they were needed for seasonal work like harvesting wheat, they were perceived as thieving tramps and told to move on when the harvest was over.

Veterans with war-related disabilities struggled to find jobs, even though a federal law in 1865 gave them preference for government jobs. In step with the U.S. economy's transition from rural to urban, some veterans who had been manual workers before the war shifted to clerical jobs. Historian Russell Johnson wonders whether a soldier's life prepared him for a postwar industrial job. Both were "dangerous, semi- or unskilled, physically exhausting, and accompanied by oppressive smoke and noise, [with] poor housing, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and epidemic disease."

While Americans were grateful for what soldiers had sacrificed in the war, too much assistance, they feared, would make veterans dependent. The ethos of the Gilded Age promised that those who seized opportunities in those changing times would be rewarded. But could every ordinary soldier make as successful a transition as Iowan Jacob Gantz apparently did? Gantz had lost an arm in the war, so he could no longer farm. He rented out his land and opened a livery and board-

inghouse, became a community leader, and served as sheriff and tax assessor. The postwar transition of Iowa soldier Jacob Gantz seemed to be the model.

For decades after the war, chronic health problems—heart disease, rheumatism, dysentery, and tuberculosis—plagued thousands of soldiers. "One of the most common sights in postbellum America was that of severely wounded amputees moving painfully along the street," writes historian Mark Schantz. Pelvic wounds were also common. "Imagine a young man," writes historian Harry Herr, "facing life soiled in urine and in constant pain, lame from destroyed pelvic bones and nerves, and sexually impotent or mentally scarred by disfigured genitals. Many men survived their pelvic wounds, but sometimes at a terrible cost."

Physicians during and after the war pondered puzzling symptoms exhibited by some veterans: restlessness, anger, agitation, nausea, fear, irritability, paranoia, despair, nightmares, and illusions. In later wars, these nervous disorders would be called shell shock, combat fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder. As Judith Anderson comments, "What is clear from ancient and modern wars is that the combination of exhaustion, hunger, marching and fighting, all done at the mercy of the elements, is a recipe for psychiatric casualties." Younger men were especially susceptible.

**T**housands of homeless veterans resided in state and national institutions. In Marshalltown, the Iowa Soldiers' Home opened in 1887. It provided

#### ABOUT THE PAINTING

*The Veteran in a New Field*, oil painting by Winslow Homer (1865). Homer, 25 when the war began, was an artist for *Harper's Weekly* during the war. He painted this in the months after the Confederates' surrender. The Union veteran has cast aside his life as a soldier; his army canteen and jacket, barely discernible, are in the right foreground.

"The optimistic spirit of Homer's painting only makes its darker undertones more moving," according to a National Endowment for the Humanities scholar. "The 'new field' of the title can't mean this field of grain, which is obviously mature and ready to harvest. It must refer instead to the change in the veteran's occupation—which necessarily calls to mind his previous activity on the battlefield. Because some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War had been fought in wheat fields, fields of grain, in popular consciousness, were associated with fields of fallen soldiers. One particularly disturbing photograph of soldiers

who had died in battle at Gettysburg was published with the title 'A Harvest of Death.'

"In keeping with those undertones, Homer's veteran handles a single-bladed scythe. By 1865, that simple farming implement was already out of date; a farmer would have used the more efficient cradle to mow a field that size. . . . [Homer depicted] a more archaic tool, and gave a picture of a farmer in his field an unsettling reference to the work of the grim reaper, the age-old personification of death.

"*The Veteran in a New Field* refers both to the desolation caused by the war and the country's hope for the future. It summons up the conflicting emotions that took hold of America—relief that the war was over, and grief for the many lives that had been lost."

—from *Picturing America*, National Endowment for the Humanities  
picturingamerica.neh.gov. Lesson 9a in "Gallery"